

# The Lake District: World Heritage Site and Favourite Off-road Destination

Lakes Watch and Lake District Green Lanes Alliance

Since our report last year there has been no change in two of the projects endangering the Lake District's OUV: plans for a zipwire at the Honister slate mine are going ahead, and the Lake District National Park Authority together with Forestry England are still actively considering a gondola/cable car and other major developments at Whinlatter.

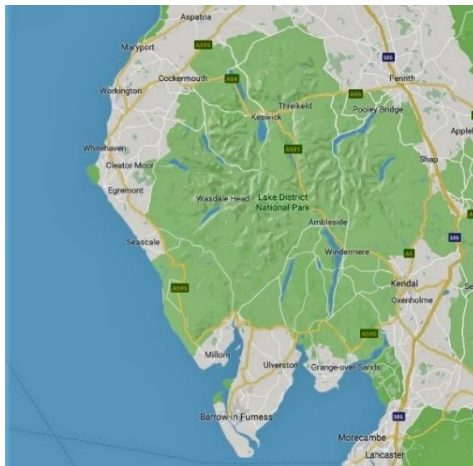


Fig. 1: The English Lake District WH Site.  
Map: OpenStreetMaps

This year's report focuses on the LDNPA's (Lake District National Park Authority) persistent refusal to protect the landscape against the impact of off-road motor vehicles on unsurfaced tracks (green lanes). The Authority is ignoring explicit requests from the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS to put an end to this activity.

## Scale and severity of the problem

### Critical routes in the Lake District

- Old Coach Road (U2236/U3132) **1**
- High Tilberthwaite (U5001) **2**
- Hodge Close or Stang End (U5002) **3**
- Little Langdale (U5003) **4**
- High Oxenfell (U5004) **5**
- Tarn Hows or Old Mountain Road (U5015) **6**
- Grizedale-Esthwaite (U5050) **7**
- High Nibthwaite-Parkmoor (U5051) – managed by a discretionary TRO **8**
- Ickenthwaite (U5064) **9**
- Moss Wood (U5203) **10**
- The Riggs (U5213) **11**
- Stile End (U5255) **12**
- Gatescarth Pass (U5257) – managed by a permit-based TRO **13**
- Elterwater/Owlet's Nest (U5529) **14**
- Rusland Pool (U5566) – managed by a seasonal TRO **15**
- Old Langdale Road (U5739) **16**
- Breast High Road (U3278) **17**
- Gamblesmire Lane (U5333) **18**

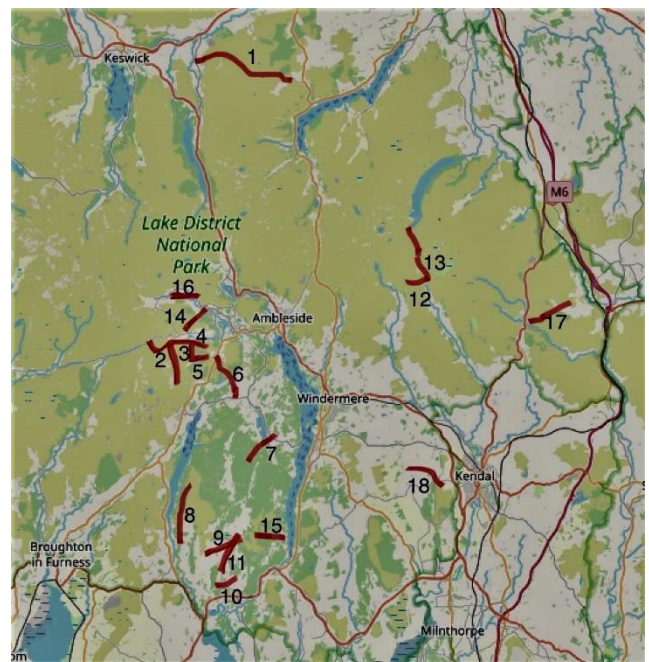


Fig 2: Routes in the Lake District affected by 4x4 driving.  
Map: OpenStreetMaps/LDGLA

The damage done to the Lake District's OUV by off-road motor vehicles is continuing to increase, impacting in particular on its agro-pastoral heritage and tranquillity. At least 18 tracks categorised by the LDNPA as highly vulnerable or vulnerable to motor traffic are seriously affected. Their overall length is 35km, representing 29% of all green lanes open to motor vehicles,

As the first ICOMOS report from May 2019 noted, information about green lanes is continuing to spread on social media. It is now possible to find footage about many of the tracks on Youtube, posted by the off-road drivers themselves, with detailed instructions on where particular green lanes are located. The presence of vehicles from other countries shows that the Lake District has become a destination of choice for off-road motorists across North-West Europe. That the National Park Authority should allow this to happen in a World Heritage site is a breach of its commitment to protect the integrity of the Lake District.



Fig. 3: A green lane near Little Langdale. *Photo: Stephen Walker*

Any hopes that the Covid lockdown would bring a change in attitudes and a new determination to protect the World Heritage site quickly evaporated: as the graphs show, levels of off-road traffic reached new peaks on three green lanes for which we have official data. Traffic volumes on the green lane from High Nibthwaite to Parkamoor on the eastern side of Coniston Water are particularly troubling. Although they were lower than for High Tilberthwaite in 2007, they have more than tripled since then. Both High Oxenfell and High Tilberthwaite have seen a sharp increase in traffic - over 30% - since 2019.

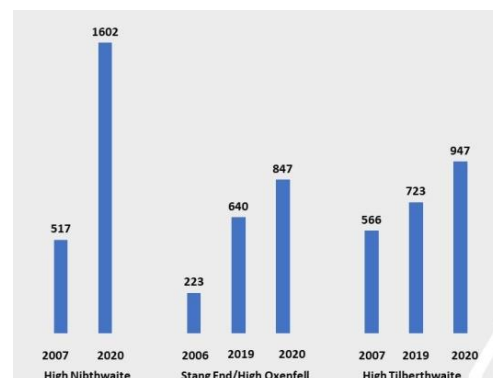


Fig. 4: Vehicle numbers at High Nibthwaite\*, High Oxenfell and High Tilberthwaite (quarter ending 30 Sep). No 2019 data available for High Nibthwaite. *Graphic: Duddon Electronics Ltd/LDNPA*

## **20 years of opposition against green lane driving**

In the late 1990s the LDNPA agreed to a voluntary restraint scheme for green lane driving, the Hierarchy of Trail Routes (HOTR). The scheme, launched on the initiative of off-road motorists, drew immediate criticism from community leaders, including the Cumbrian Association of Local Councils. They said it would lead to an increase in the number of vehicles, as indeed proved to be the case

In 2000 a campaign group in the Langdales area started alerting the National Park Authority to the appalling effects of green lane driving on the landscape, a unique symbiosis of nature and human activity. Where people had been able to enjoy the relative wildness and beauty of mountain views, sheep farms and abandoned quarries, they could no longer be sure that their walk would not be disturbed by convoys of large four-wheel drives and motorbikes. Sheep farmers found their work was being disrupted by increasing numbers of vehicles driving through their yards, particularly at weekends. When moving sheep to and from the fells on narrow tracks farmers now ran the risk of having their route blocked by motor vehicles.



Fig. 5: 4x4s on the High Oxenfell track. *Photo: LDGLA*

## **The National Park proposes a ban ...**

In 2003 the LDNPA published proposals to put an end to green lane driving. Leaflets issued by the Authority described it as incompatible with National Park purposes. According to the LDNPA's corporate operations director the voluntary restraint scheme HOTR had not eliminated 'erosion, irresponsible drivers and regular complaints about inappropriate vehicle use'. It was the hope of the Authority that a ban would make the practice of green lane driving socially unacceptable.

## **... and then changes its mind**

The official LDNPA minutes of the HOTR advisory group of 23 September 2003 reveal that, faced with this prospect, the umbrella group for off-road motorists, LARA, withdrew its cooperation with the National Park Authority.

The minutes of 12 January 2004 sum up what happened next: "LARA are ... cooperating again" and "The LDNPA were revising policy AR4 [on green lane driving] in the draft National Park Management Plan."

Two conclusions can be drawn:



- a) Even with relatively low numbers of off-road vehicles on green lanes the LDNPA had reached the view that the practice was incompatible with National Park purposes and needed to be stopped for the sake of conservation.
- b) Between September 2003 and January 2004 off-road motoring groups became the dominant influence over National Park policy making on access to green lanes. They continue to set the LDNPA agenda to this day.

### ICOMOS technical reviews and the LDNPA response

In detailed reviews of two tracks near Little Langdale ICOMOS commented on the impact of green lane driving on landscape and farming, concluding that the practice was a potential threat to the OUV and should be eliminated.

ICOMOS also rejected the LDNPA's argument that green lane driving was taking place at the time of inscription and was therefore, at least implicitly, accepted by ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre. ICOMOS quotes the following passage from the nomination document:

*'Coniston has featured in conservation battles over access and recreational use of lakes and tracks since the 1950s. These battles have focussed on the balance between recreation and quiet enjoyment. Consequently the use of power boats and water skiing are now controlled on the lake and legal battles continue over the right to use motorised vehicles on former stock and quarry roads.'*

The clear impression created by the LDNPA is that it can be trusted to pursue a policy of conservation. This trust proved to be misplaced.

### Protection for off-road motorists

In its final decision on the two green lanes near Little Langdale in October 2019 the LDNPA rejected a ban and opted for a management approach, precisely the same approach that had been in place for 20 years and had demonstrably failed to curb vehicle numbers and protect the tracks. This is the decision the off-road motorists had asked for. It deliberately ignored the ICOMOS request to eliminate green lane driving, as well as brushing aside representations from the National Trust, the Friends of the Lake District, the Ramblers, the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association and many others.



Fig. 6: Recreational 4x4s near Tarn Hows. Photo: LDGLA

## **Summary**

Given the large-scale degradation of the OUV caused by off-road motor vehicles on green lanes and the potential danger to the OUV by the planned Honister zipwire and the projected Whinlatter cable car, we now ask the World Heritage Centre for a Reactive Monitoring Mission with a view to determine whether the property should be inscribed in the List of World Heritage in Danger.